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## Sardinia: the "Greatest Poem" and its Maritime Face

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### Abstract

The Mediterranean Sea contributes to the vital rediscovery of meaning advocated by Giambattista Vico's poetic geography and Sardinian writers search for roots by interjecting a sense of movement in the otherwise immobile Sardinian landscape. First, we see this feature at work in Grazia Deledda's *Cosima* and Salvatore Satta's *Il giorno del giudizio*. In their novels the movement of the landscape still concretizes in what Deleuze and Guattari call "faciality" (*visageité*). This characteristic tends to vanish in the writers of the younger generations. In Alberto Capitta's *Creaturine*, Giulia Clarkson's *La città d'acqua* and Marcello Fois's *Nel tempo di mezzo* the "faciality" of the landscape tends to disappear, wrecked by violent history or submerged in a sort of Heraclitean flow of things. Finally, in Giulio Angioni's *Il mare intorno* the sea recovers its double and contradictory nature of agent of both isolation and communication.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, landscape, more than human humanism, Grazia Deledda, Salvatore Satta, Alberto Capitta, Giulia Clarkson, Marcello Fois, Giambattista Vico, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari

### Resumen

El mar Mediterráneo contribuye al vital redescubrimiento del significado que promueve la geografía poética de Giambattista Vico y escritores de Sardinia buscan las raíces de los incorporando una sensación de movimiento en el paisaje de Sardinia, de otra manera, inmóvil. Primero, vemos este aspecto en funcionamiento en *Cosima* de Grazia Deledda y *Il giorno del giudizio* de Salvatore Satta. En sus novelas, el movimiento del paisaje todavía condensa lo que Deleuze y Guattari llaman "facialidad" (*visageité*). Esta característica tiende a desvanecerse en los escritores de generaciones más jóvenes. En *Creaturine* de Alberto Capitta, *La città d'acqua* de Giulia Clarkson y *Nel tempo di mezzo* de Marcello Fois, la "facialidad" del paisaje tiende a desaparecer, destrozado por una historia violenta o sumergida en una especie de flujo heraclítico de las cosas. Finalmente, en *Il mare intorno* de Guilo Angioni, el mar recobra su naturaleza contradictoria y doble de agente de aislamiento así como de comunicación.

**Palabras clave:** Ecocrítica, paisaje, humanismo más que humano, Grazia Deledda, Salvatore Satta, Alberto Capitta, Giulia Clarkson, Marcello Fois, Giambattista Vico, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari

### Poetic geography and more than human humanism

In my recent research I have introduced the ideas of poetic geography and "more than human" humanism as they emerge in the philosophy of Giambattista Vico. I have insisted on a new understanding of Vico's humanism in contrast with the exclusive and reductive attention given by most scholars, including Erich Auerbach and Edward Said,

to Vico's synthetic epistemology, the *verum ipsum factum* principle, that leads them to neglect important analytical and genealogical dimensions of Vico's philology, losing the productive interplay between philology and philosophy so characteristic of Vico's thought. In their interpretation, Vico's philosophy is reduced to a pervasive historicism and perspectivism. They maintain that Vico identifies history and human nature and conceives human nature as a function of history. Auerbach even suggests that the word *natura* in some crucial paragraphs of Vico's *Scienza nuova*, such as 346 and 347, should be translated as "historical development" ("Vico and Aesthetic Historicism" 118).

While I concede that Vico's philosophy tends to blur the distinction between "original nature" and "human institutions," I nevertheless disagree with Auerbach when he states that such distinction is "meaningless" for Vico ("Vico and Aesthetic Historicism" 116). Auerbach's and Said's readings pay attention exclusively to the creation of human institutions, whereas Vico considers how the relation to nature also plays a role in the formation of human beings and human culture, as part of the complexity and interconnectivity of life, resisting acritical historicization and reduction to purely human paradigms. The theoretical implications of my approach to Vico's humanism and making of history lead to a new understanding of Auerbach's idea that "our philological home is the earth" ("Philology and *Weltliteratur*" 17), one in which philology and philosophy in a genuinely Vichian fashion return to interrogate not only the historical institutions but also their relationships to earth, sea, and the natural environment as a significant part in the formation of humanity. Thus, in my essay, I use Vico's idea of "places of humanity" as the driving force of a new humanism, one that is "more than human," and has larger implications for the study of literature and the ways in which we read texts that are usually centered on the human subject conceived as the only driving force of literary production.

The expression "more than human," in ecocritical and eco-philosophical studies, was introduced by David Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996) where he argues that "we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human" (*The Spell* ix). The notion of a "more than human" humanism has been also developed by Serenella Iovino in her volume *Ecologia letteraria* (67-70) and in an essay entitled "Ecocriticism and a Non-Anthropocentric Humanism" (47-50). In this article she makes the case for a new humanism, an "ecological humanism," one that rejects the dualism of humanity and nature conveyed by traditional and historical notions of humanism. In the same perspective, Louise Westling speaks of a "green humanism" as a new form of intersubjective humanism (3). Drawing on my previous essay on "Vico's more than human humanism" (2011), the present article enters into a productive dialogue with Abram's and Iovino's theorizations by showing how Vico's idea of poetic geography may nurture and reinforce a relational idea of humanism that is so important in environmental philosophy and ecocriticism. Vico's philology is not limited to the culture of the book or to the world of nations but starts literally in the forests and includes an obscure time, the fabulous beginnings, in which humanity is not completely formed and is exposed to and deeply conditioned by the natural environment that encompasses all living forms (Vico, *New Science* 202, 361).

There is a significant convergence between Vico's idea on the origin of language and that of the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Abram in *The Spell of the Sensuous* suggested, in passing, the originality of Vico's idea of language as an anticipation of Merleau-Ponty's (76). Like Vico, Merleau-Ponty radically distinguishes his ideas from those of Descartes. For both Vico and Merleau-Ponty Descartes's philosophy—as summarized in the famous "Je pense, donc je suis" (IV)—has detached the conscious subject from the world that is given in experience, and created the illusion that humans completely make the nature that is given to them (Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie* x). By refusing what he calls the "conceit of scholars" (*New Science* 124; 126) and pointing to an originary, pre-cultural, and unspoken element about the relation of humans to nature, Vico anticipated Merleau-Ponty's idea of the intercorporeality originating human relations with nature (Merleau-Ponty, *Nature* 216-26). Vico's poetic language and Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception do not refer to a process by which human consciousness knows nature and the "external world" as neutral, separated, or as "objects" essentially distinct from a "subject." Poetic language and perception, on the contrary, are behaviors affected by the body, not as an observer but as a living and active corporeal entity, participating in the life of nature. In this way, humanity emerges not as a substance, and essence, "an imposition of a for-itself on a body in-itself," but as an interbeing, as an event in which the body is interposed in the circuit of the world (208-09).

Angus Fletcher in his *A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment, and the Future of Imagination* recognizes the importance of Vico's idea of poetic creation of the human world as a continuous dialogue and confrontation with the natural environment. While Vico speaks of "poetic geography," Fletcher introduces the idea of the "environment-poem" that "bridges the gap between the opaque thingness of nature lying 'out-there,' and the philosophical and scientific access we gain by developing terms, formulas, explanations, and theories of the order and meaning hidden within that opaque nature" (12). Fletcher even suggests that we can understand what Whitman means when he writes that "The United States are the greatest poem" only if we know Vico (97). Whitman seems to share Vico's idea of a general poetics by which civilization comes into being. Whitman follows the new idea of truth implied in Vico's *verum factum* principle, that we know only what we have made (150, 172), in a way that is inclusive of and gives voice to the natural environment. "This *verum factum* principle governs the making and exfoliating of *Leaves of Grass* as an evolving body of accumulating text" (172) that functions only as (and in) process, precisely because it expresses the complex network of natural and social relationships of a porous poetic voice.

Vico's "poetic geography" can be fruitfully associated with contemporary ideas such as Fletcher's "environment-poem" and Barry Lopez's fundamental statement of the relation of mind and place; a relationship where the interior landscape of the human mind is influenced if not shaped by the exterior landscape constituted by the specific region inhabited (Lopez 64-65). Moreover, Abram's idea of language as not exclusively human product articulated in his recent *Becoming Animal* (2010) finds an exemplar

antecedent in Vico's philosophy and philology. Abram's ask, "What if the very language we now speak arose first in response to an animate, expressive world—as shuttering reply not just to other of our species but to an enigmatic cosmos that already *spoke to us* in a myriad of tongues?" (*Becoming* 4). Vico develops a similar argument in his *New Science*. For him the language of the first human beings was neither self-contained and original nor self-determined but it emerged out of imaginative reactions to external stimuli triggered by the natural environment which is given to humans and in which humans participate (444). Finally, in Vico's philosophy there is no trace of that epistemological *hubris* that according to Bateson is at the origin of the ecological crisis of our time, one in which human beings rule as autocrats over the environment neglecting the mutual dependence of mind and nature and leading to the degradation of the entire supreme cybernetic system (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* 478-487).

The present essay shows how Vico's important and neglected notion of a relational, non-exclusively human humanism based on a deep listening of and response to the natural environment is still alive in the works of Grazia Deledda and Salvatore Satta, the founding writers of Sardinian poetic geography. I will focus on how these writers perceive Sardinia and the Mediterranean as constitutive of a sense of identity in which land and sea, history and nature intersect in inextricable circles. The Sardinian writers of younger generations, such as Alberto Capitta, Giulia Clarkson, Marcello Fois, and Giulio Angioni, are also considered in this essay as a further level of Sardinian poetic geography, one that faces the flattening, homogenizing forces of contemporary capitalist globalization.

I close this theoretical premise introducing the notion of "face" included in the title of this essay. I do not consider the "face" only in "humanist" or intrahuman terms as it happens in Levinas' idea of "face-to-face" encounter with the Other. On the one hand, I have in mind Vico's metaphysical idea of *conatus* that sees the presence of a divine drive toward infinity not only on the face of the other and/or in human institutions but also on the "face" of the sky, and more in general the places of humanity and the natural environment. On the other hand, I utilize the immanentist notions of "visage" (face) and "visagéité" (faciality) developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as correlative of "paysage" (landscape) and paysageté (landscapity) (*A Thousand Plateaus* 167-192).

## The island, the sea and the mountains

Sardinia is an "island-continent" ("île-continent"), using the terminology of Predrag Matvejević (41). Its inhabitants developed through the centuries a strong sense of identity, often in opposition to the mainland Italian peninsula. The critical literature on the Mediterranean from Braudel's *La méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949) to Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000) stresses above all the fact that the Mediterranean Sea is a space of connectivity among regions and cultures. Nonetheless, the insular environment of Sardinia helps us to understand to what extent this is true and how, on the contrary, it may create a sense of separation and solitude in which the

sea and the natural environment still represent major factors in the definition of human identity, more important than any historical features brought to the island from the Italian peninsula or elsewhere. Dealing with Sardinia one has to resist the use of an "orientalist" terminology emphasizing Sardinian "primitivism," as happens for example in David Herbert Lawrence's travelogue *Sea and Sardinia* where we read, "Sardinia, which is like nowhere. Sardinia, which has no history, no date, no race, no offering. Let it be Sardinia. They say neither Romans nor Phoenicians, Greeks nor Arabs ever subdued Sardinia. It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilization" (15).

However, one has to recognize the distinctive character of Sardinia in modern Europe, largely based on a sense of identity inspired by a special and enduring relationship to the land and the sea. "Island-continents" like Sardinia trigger a reconceptualization of the Mediterranean as a crossroad of civilization; they lead to a recognition of the complexity of Mediterranean culture and its irreducibility to a unified idea (Matvejević 26-27). Moreover, Sardinia's "isolation" and "archaism" cannot be conceived as a natural condition outside of history but as the result of specific historical circumstances in relation to the natural environment. Undoubtedly, the sea on the coast and the mountains in the interior of the island are decisive factors of the insular condition and formation of Sardinian historical uniqueness in the European context (Mattone 27). As Braudel points out, the etymology of the term "Mediterranean"—referring to a sea surrounded by lands (*mediam terram*)—needs to be articulated more specifically as "a sea between mountains" to appreciate the important role that mountains play in Mediterranean civilization. Mountains create natural barriers to communication and favor archaic and autarkic forms of economy (22; 29); in Sardinia they are islands within the island, contributing to the seclusion of the population even more than the sea (Mattone 31). In the interior part of the island, dominated by an agro-pastoral economy and way of living, even the presence of the sea is not so obvious and evident as one could expect. In fact, for centuries human settlements in Sardinia escaped the coasts that were inhospitable due to piracy and malaria. From this situation originated the idea that Sardinians were foreigners to the sea and the coast (16).

Sardinian film director Salvatore Mereu poetically represents this historical paradox in his movie *Ballo a tre passi* (2003). The movie is divided into four episodes following the natural rhythm of the seasons. In *Primavera*, the first episode, a group of children run from the countryside to the sea; for one of them, Andrea, it was the first time he had seen the sea. Thus, the view of the sea provokes in him a deep sense of wonder, underlined by the ecstatic movement of the camera following the children immersing themselves in the Mediterranean. As contemporary Sardinian writer Salvatore Mannuzzu suggests, it seems that on the island the sea is a thousand miles away or that it never existed; however, he adds, the sea is there, very close, "nothing wouldn't be the same without the sea (...) the invisible, terrible and mysterious furrow on which Sardinia's fate depended entirely, throughout a thousand years" (1226; translation mine).

Not unlike these native voices, an outsider from his native England, David H. Lawrence perceives and describes the Sardinian landscape and sea as a savage, sublime



beauty that triggers a feeling of raw emptiness and lack of meaning:

The road ran along by the sea, above the sea, swinging gently up and down, and running on to a sea-encroaching hilly promontory in the distance. There were no high lands. The valley was left behind, and moors surrounded us, wild, desolate, uninhabited and uninhabitable moors sweeping up gently on the left, and finishing where the land dropped low and cliff-like to the sea on the right. No life was now in sight: even no ship upon the pale blue sea. (...). It was a savage, dark-bushed, sky-exposed land, forsaken to the sea and the sun. (276)

If we turn to the works of indigenous writers who established a long-term relationship to the island, its landscape and the sea, we find another picture, one in which the Mediterranean does not represent only an abstract, limiting, and forceful constraint for the islanders (Franks). Alternately, the Mediterranean is conceived as an opening space and the isolation is not considered an absolute factor in Sardinian identity and history. Notwithstanding the lack of a diffused urban life, its insularity, and agro-pastoral archaism, endowed with raw resources like salt, carbon, metals, and forests, Sardinia has been at the center of colonial maritime commercial routes from ancient Roman to modern Italian history (Mattone 36-38). In this historical perspective the Mediterranean Sea has been for Sardinia the open door that brought the island in touch with history, quite often as the target of violent colonial exploitation.

As we move now from this very brief anthropological and historical sketch to the reading of modern and contemporary Sardinian novels we will see how this historical perspective is received and expanded in novels with an intense autobiographical dimension, such as *Cosima* (1937) by Grazia Deledda and *Il giorno del giudizio* (1977) by Salvatore Satta. Both Deledda and Satta were born in Nuoro, in central-eastern Sardinia. We will focus on the following questions: How do these Sardinian writers represent the relationship to the sea? How do they contribute to a sense of Sardinian identity? How does the Mediterranean landscape become an agent of a poetic geography and personal history in their works?

### **Sardinia: “the greatest poem” and the Mediterranean**

Grazia Deledda (1871-1936), Nobel Prize for Literature in 1926 represents the origins of modern and contemporary Sardinian literature. I focus my analysis on *Cosima* (1937), a posthumous autobiographical novel that reveals the protagonist’s intimate and enduring relationship with the spaces and things of her daily life and with the broader Sardinian landscape. *Cosima* thinks of herself in relation to these spaces (“As in all the simple houses of the time, the kitchen was the most lived-in room, warmest with life and intimacy”) and their silent, inanimate presences:

The most characteristic objects were on the shelf, such as a row of brass lamps and refilling cruets next to them with long beaks like an alchemist’s. And a little clay pitcher with good oil, a coffeepot and old red and yellow cups, tin plates that seemed to have come from an excavation of a prehistoric age; and finally the shepherd’s trencher, that is, a wooden tray with a hollowed-out place for salt. Other rural objects gave characteristic color to the surroundings. (2)

On the other hand, Cosima presents her bonds to the natural landscape as one of the most fateful aspects of the life bequeathed to her from her ancestors: "She had inherited a foundation of goodness and tolerance from her father and paternal ancestors--almost all farmers and shepherds patriachally united with the earth and nature" (57). When she was fourteen she witnessed the tragic death of her young sister, Enza; this dramatic episode instilled in her "a terror that never again left her" along with a mysterious sense of involuntary guilt that she associated with the ancestral mysterious guiltiness of the first fathers, responsible for drawing an eternal sorrow to every human being (54-55). The adolescent Cosima perceives her life and even her poetic vocation as a consequence of forceful, subterranean impulses that she connects to the force of destiny and nature (56).

Cosima first discovers the sea during one of the visits to the rural property that her family inherited. The face-to-face meeting with this elemental landscape taught her more than "ten lessons with the literature professor," triggering an intimate and profound relationship with nature, one in which the sea appears as the sword of destiny separating forever Sardinia from the mainland: "from a castle boulder that falcons wheeled above as though attracted to the sun like the night moths to a lamp, she saw a large shining sword placed at the foot of a cliff like a sign that the island had been cut from the Continent and so it must remain forever. It was the sea, which Cosima saw for the first time" (61).

However, the Mediterranean Sea does not reveal to the fourteen-year-old Cosima only the ineluctable and violent force of destiny, the same force that she witnessed in the death of her sister Enza, or the inextricable bond tying her family of farmers and shepherds to nature's elemental ground. During the same visit to the family property in the countryside, Cosima leaves behind the games and the feast with her brother and other friends to return alone, like a flying swallow, to the top of the precipice where the sea could be seen. In the meditation that follows the sea does not appear as the sword of the destiny anymore but as the liquid, movable support that engenders Cosima's dream to move beyond that secluding natural barrier:

The sea: the great mystery, the moor of the blue thickets with a hedge of hawthorn along the shore; the desert that the swallow dreamed of flying across towards the marvelous regions of the Continent. If nothing more she would have liked to stay there on the slope like the lady of the solitary manor, watching the horizon for a sail to appear with its symbol of hope or to see the prince of love jump on shore dressed in the colors of the sea. (62-63)

She knows that she cannot imitate the flight of the swallow or that of the hawk; she must return to the pen at the whistle of the shepherd. Nonetheless, "she shook her arms once more toward the sea, seeming to touch the waves;" in other words, she does not renounce the dream brought to her by the vision of the sea and, concludes, "she never abandoned that dream" (64).

Cosima maintains a profound and reflective relationship also with the countryside and the seasonal changes. For instance, she recalls the grape harvest, one of the most

important events of autumn. She observes and appreciates the vitality of the grape in contrast with the solitude of the faraway landscape closed by a barrier of mountains: "Only the vineyard with its quadrate greens and yellows with some rows of large low fig trees cheered up the sweet sad solitude of the place. The distant mountains formed a wall of blue around the horizon" (106). The "focal point" of the landscape, the most beautiful element of it was a "solitary pine" immersed in the flames of the sun in an uncultivated land (111). There, away from her friends who stayed in the vineyard, Cosima discovers that every aspect and inhabitant of the landscape, including the insects and any kind of animal, has a face:

The grass seemed rose-colored. Every seed, every little flower, every berry had a golden eye returning her look. And the distant mountains, aquamarine color, evaporated into the orange and green and red sky that little by little changed color. A ladybug flew up from a bush onto Cosima's dress, as onto a higher bush. Down, down, it calmly went right to her arm and down to her hand. It was a marvelous and almost terrible being. On its flat little back, in dark red lacquer, a perfect human face was designed in black, with the eyes, nose, mouth all a little oblique as in Japanese masks. (112)

This deep relationship to the landscape and the natural environment facilitates a turning-point decision about her life that she expresses in poetic and religious language. She meditates that even the wasteland is inhabited by the glory of the Lord, making life beautiful and enjoyable. It was a sort of revelation that put her one rung higher on the ladder of Jacob:

And it came to her for no other reason than that she saw the evening star shine above the mountains no less and no more marvelous than the ladybug and the wild grasses that perfumed her walk. She decided to expect nothing that might come from outside herself, from the world agitated by men; but to expect everything from herself, from the mystery of her inner life. (113)

The love for the earth is so strong that it becomes part of the flesh and blood (121). The landscape is not the object of Cosima's gaze; on the contrary, her thoughts and poetic reflections are part of the landscape, they become landscape as the turn inward is accompanied by the recognition of the landscape's face. Conversely, the landscape becomes embodied in Cosima's face, in her most intimate sense of identity. So much so that when she moves to Cagliari, a city on the sea, to pursue her literary career, "Cosima had the impression that the whole landscape moved in surprise at seeing her moving, going toward a new life" (136). The new house in which she will live had a balcony with a view of the sea. Without doubt, for Cosima the sea represents an opening to the future and to a life change, a liquid dream that is a Mediterranean dream, one in which land and sea intersect. Indeed, from her balcony Cosima could hear the sound of the sea, a distant sound that at first she did not recognize and "seemed like the pine tree in the vineyard" (138).

Cosima enters into a dialogue with the landscape of her adolescence and finds her identity giving a voice and face to the natural environment and the animals, providing a powerful example of "poetic geography." Cosima repeats, and renews within a Christian perspective, the gesture of Vico's *bestioni*, that became humans and found their identity



attributing a face to the sky, and in general to the original places of humanity and the natural environment. The primitives named Jove, Cybele, and Neptune as “substances of the sky, the earth, and the sea, which they imagined to be animate divinities and were therefore true to their senses in believing them to be gods” (*New Science* 402). In contemporary philosophy, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari developed this important correlation between “faciality” (*visageité*) and “landscapiness” (*paysagété*) to underline that landscape as long as it becomes inhabited by human presence is not a milieu but a “deterritorialized world” (172). In our case, Cosima’s poetic deterritorialization means that her poetic voice incarnates a new layer of meaning of the land that speaks to her. As her human face reflects an unexplored landscape—the mystery of the inner life—the loved landscape in which she grows up is populated by imagined or dreamed-of faces.

In Cosima’s reflections, we can also see a correlation between face and maritime landscape or, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, we can appreciate the fact that Cosima’s landscape has a “maritime face” (184), which is at the origin of the process of subjectification. The maritime face of the landscape is not a passive milieu but an agent in that process of subjective signification that works as a real or fictive expansion of space. Cosima-Grazia’s attention to the Mediterranean Sea establishes the maritime face as the fundamental paradigm of her poetic geography and of the Sardinian landscape. We can find this paradigm in *Il giorno del giudizio* (*The Day of Judgment*, 1977), a novel by the other great Sardinian writer of the twentieth century, Salvatore Satta (1902-1975). The wild and hilly landscape around Nuoro, surrounded by the mountains of the Barbagia region of Sardinia, plays a crucial role in Satta’s novel, emerging as the most important factor of a culture and a community largely illiterate and still immersed in rural activities such as bread- and wine-making, described by the author in extensive and intense pages almost as natural rituals. This quote from chapter three, where the narrator is observing the garden of his large, comfortable and beautiful house, brings us back to Deledda’s maritime face of the Sardinian landscape:

In front of the loggia is a short stretch of garden, which I have filled with oleanders. They are still in flower, and in the moist air they seem to be listening to the songs of birds, which God has made such early risers. One of them darts among the branches, the leaves quiver, but only for an instant. I have always thought that there is a secret relationship between plants and animals and the wind. A bird does not alight in vain among foliage, not for nothing does the swing sway the great leafy crests of the trees, that only we think of as immobile, classifying them under the horrible, unjust heading of ‘vegetable.’ Their motion is certainly not like ours, but it is like the motion of the sea, which is senseless to call immobile, just as it is senseless—with apology to Homer—to call infertile. (37-38)

As in the words of Cosima, the landscape has here its own life and its own motion; such a motion takes shape and reality in correlation to the image of the sea. In this correlation the landscape obtains a maritime face that is the result of a poetic dialogue between the human and the natural environment. This process takes place in three movements: it starts with the body and the perceptions of the senses, that are then de-territorialized in name of a secret, invisible life of the natural environment and of the intimate sphere of the human subject; finally, the de-territorialization of the body ends up in a re-

territorialization on the face. In other words, when the senses are not the only semiotic signifier there is a major investment on the subjective face, and landscape acquires its own face, coming to life in a poetic geography. In the early stages of the relationship between nature and the poet there is a pre-linguistic moment on which Vico insists in fundamental paragraphs of his *New Science* (385 and 444). The narrator of *Il giorno del giudizio* is convinced that any representation of the systems of relationships cannot really do justice to life itself, precisely because between the systems of relationships "there is life itself and life is never reduced to a portrait or a photograph" (50).

When the narrator says that it is senseless to call the sea "infertile," we have a clear sense of the relationship of the island to the Mediterranean Sea. In Satta's poetic geography the sea becomes a productive invisible agent in the formation of an identity based not only on a vital pantheistic view of nature but also on a sense of insularity, seclusion, solitude, and lack of communication. These two elements contribute to endow with a ritual character the descriptions of the central activities that take place on the narrator's rural property, bread- and wine-making. In a time in which everything was handmade and homemade, bread-making was a genuine joyful moment for the boys and the women "who they felt they had all been brought together by the ineffable thing called life" (64). The narrator indulges in describing the different phases of the making, giving them a sacred flavor: "God only knows from the depths of how many centuries this bread has come down to us. Maybe the Jews brought it when they were driven out of Africa in the ancient days. The making of it had all the solemnity of ritual, partly because the works went on until morning, and the small hours brought a hush with them" (64).

Wine-making had the same joyous ritual atmosphere that came from perceiving the "mysterious life" of bread and grapes, shining and embracing the human community brought together for a special ceremony. Indeed, this special moment is introduced as an "echo of a very remote agricultural or pastoral community" (69), one that has been lost in the present Nuoro of the narrator, where "no one has friends" (69), including the protagonist of this story, Don Sebastiano. Nonetheless, wine-making for the people like him, who had property in the countryside, was still a moment of sharing, in which the children would receive a special poetic education from their exposure to the life of the natural environment: the countryside "entered into his [Don Sebastiano's] children as poetry" (70). The narrator describes these ritual moments as immersed in the "pagan mystery of nature that accompanies the Christian mystery" (78). Then, the children had no need of a Christmas crib because without knowing it they "found the crib in the vineyard, and that rectangle of earth, with its people, its buildings, its myth, opened their hearts to mystery" (78).

The end of vine harvest restores the house to its solitude and seclusion, which is the dominant sensation of a community relegated to ritual poetic moments (69). In other words, the de-territorialization made possible by the poetic geography and a more-than-human sense of community, has to undergo a process of re-territorialization that relocates the family and the community within the limitations of the wild natural

environment and the violent historical process. The narrator resists and condemns, in particular, the latter.

In the nearly half a century that separates *Il giorno del giudizio* from *Cosima* the pervasive forces of neo-colonialism and globalization have destroyed more and more the very possibility of perceiving the landscape as a face, depriving the geography of Sardinia of an authentic sense of place. Satta is aware that this process started long before him and had a focal moment in the development of alphabetic culture on the island, when the children of "villages of shepherds, of peasants, of people toiling away to get nowhere ... had discovered the alphabet, that prodigious weapon of conquest; or at least of redemption from the arid, stinting soil" (11). The alphabetic culture and the books are considered as weapons of colonial conquest that, even though they provide redemption from the arid soil, at the same time destroy the insular condition and the profound relationship of the islanders to their land and sea, creating an artificial and cultural sense of belonging. Another significant moment in this colonial conquest is the cutting down of the forests and the "devastation of the island" caused by "gentlemen from the Continent" (5).

The deforestation of the island started in the nineteenth century as a result of the introduction of capitalist organization of the land. It had devastating consequences for the environment of contemporary Sardinia causing floods, changes in the hydrometeorological system and malaria (Mattone 70). The disasters provoked by human interventions add to those caused by the inhospitable climate, especially in summertime, when the sun burns the land and creates desert. This is another aspect of Sardinian landscape that emerges in Satta's novel. In wintertime, the region surrounding Nuoro is a garden, but that happy season lasts only three months: "After that the sun became spiteful, began to repent for the joy it had brought to humans, and went mad in its turn. It took him a week to create a desert" (20; modified translation). This combination of natural and historical disasters determines the melancholic atmosphere of *Il giorno del giudizio* whose narration is not by chance triggered by a visit to Nuoro's cemetery as an evocation of the dead. The imagery of death contributes to the dramatic sense of loss of roots that Salvatore Mannuzzu has called "mourning for roots" at the center of this masterpiece of Sardinian literature (1128).

### Search for roots and resistance

Contemporary Sardinian writers have taken up both Grazia Deledda's search for roots in the Sardinian landscape and Salvatore Satta's "mourning for roots." The Mediterranean Sea still plays an important role in their writings, in the attempt at restoring the "faciality" of Sardinian landscape that tourism and globalization have broken into many little pieces lacking a comprehensive unity. The challenge of contemporary Sardinian writers lies in the effort of still conceiving the possibility of a poetic geography in a time in which Sardinia, the "greatest poem" is neglected as a source of meaning and invested of a unilateral and devastating human action. This challenge has to be considered in relation to the specific relationship established by

Sardinian writers with their environment and can be seen as the driving force that kept them distant from the major claims of radical postmodern narrations, advocating not only the end of truth but also of the search for truth. For this reason the poetic geography of Sardinian writers of the younger generation tends to acquire an ethical dimension (Cossu 54-56).

Alberto Capitta's resilience to give up the search for meaning in life is emblematic of the resistance of these writers to the pervasive and destructive forces of neocolonialism and globalization. Born in 1954, director, playwright, and actor, Capitta is one of the most interesting writers of contemporary Sardinian literature. He draws on Satta's conviction that there is a "secret relationship" between plants and animals, the wind and the sea, and constructs a narrative in which all creatures, *creaturine* in his language, are reduced to their biological dimension and in deep communication among themselves. Humans dialogue with plants and animals and share with them a secret sensual correspondence. This is especially true for Nicola, one of the two orphan protagonists of Capitta's *Creaturine* (Critters 2004). The only survivor of a shipwreck that submerged his entire family in the sea, he travels alone for a long time and chooses to live far away from the orphanage and any form of society in order to entertain his secret dialogue with trees, mountains, rivers, and animals of all sorts. The direction chosen by Capitta for his narrative is magical realism, in the attempt to catch in his writing the breathing of life itself (Cossu 55). Capitta's stories create a poetic geography based on a continuous de-territorialization that captures the flux of perceptions and secret communion that embraces human life. However, there is no re-territorialization following this destabilizing sensory fluidity. In the end, when Nicola meets his friend Rosario on the seashore the narrator clearly states that the maritime landscape is faceless "The sea was breathing without face ... no horizon was visible" (229; translation mine).

*La Città d'acqua* (City of Water, 2003) by Giulia Clarkson—playwright, journalist, and novelist winner of the 2002 Deledda Prize—addresses the disappearance of the culture and system of human and natural relationships based on the lagoon fishermen. The lagoon's space, a physical and metaphoric reality of the Mediterranean condition between land and sea, is being progressively shattered and disintegrated by the diffusion of urban commercial settling, pollution and disease. Frantziscu, the protagonist of the novel, grew up in the lagoon and loved it. However, showing a real Mediterranean spirit, Frantziscu thinks that the water is not helpful enough to recuperate all the vital energies he has lost. For this reason, he decides to immerse himself into the depths of the earth and to live hidden in subterranean caves and secluded from society (200-201).

The exploration of the ravines and holes of the earth is a physical and metaphoric attempt to touch the primary, fundamental, terrestrial, and biological roots of human existence. Thus, Frantziscu discovers the subterranean life that exists under the surface of the earth, profaned in its sacredness by the waste of human civilization. There, in the "many layers of sedimentation of matter," he sees the head of an ancient statue, which he names Donna Giulia and loves like a real creature. The novel closes with Frantziscu's melancholic reflections on the relationships between land and sea. He concludes that

while the earth hides in its bowels the signs of centuries of civilization, water drags them in its perennial flow (225-26). In Clarkson's novel the water's flow submerges the scripts of time, thus becoming a metaphor for the survival struggle in which natural and human causes combined lead to the death of the landscape.

The landscape's vital movement, an essential feature of Sardinian literature from Deledda to Satta, becomes more frantic in Capitta's poetic prose and, in different more theoretical ways, in Clarkson's and Marcello Fois' novels. Vincenzo Chironi, the protagonist of Fois's *Nel tempo di mezzo* (*In the Time Between*, 2012), is an orphan who visits Sardinia for the first time in 1943, the terrible time of malaria and hunger. His search for identity results at first in a rebirth triggered by the contemplation of the landscape through which he perceives the elementary blend of gasiform, earthy, watery elements that make him think of the primordial origin of time (44-45). This perception remains crucial in Vincenzo's search for roots as he comes to realize that human origins are related to a disordered and confused bundle of contingencies. Thus, Vincenzo develops a materialistic Heraclitean philosophy, arguing that the mountains, as all entities, move and change; nothing remains still. He considers life as the domain of material contingency, uncontrollable by humans. What really matters, what gives a true meaning and identity is life before nature, which for Vincenzo is the "hell of matter" (127), a sort of Heraclitean fire, as Erwin Chargaff would put it.

In this perspective, the original source that gives Nuoro a sense and an identity begins where the city ends and consists of the rocky leaden mountains which surround the city. Conversely, real human identity begins when the individual ends; it depends on the fluidity of life before nature and maintains its contingency even when rooted in human relationships as formed by ancestral descent. However, Vincenzo's lineage and the continuity of descent he is looking for take place in Sardinia, that he perceives as a "raft in the middle of the sea" (139), exposed to the extreme contingency of life before nature, which is able to undermine in a blink of the eye all human efforts at constructing their identity. Even Vincenzo's grandfather Michele Angelo at the end of the novel, in one of the last conversations he has with him, insists that "everything flows" and nothing remains the same, even the places in which we are born (185). In this perspective, one understands why the sea, as Marcello Fois writes in his recent *In Sardegna non c'è il mare* (*In Sardinia there is no sea*), is one of the few things uniting the Sardinian people (13).

One of the protagonists of *Il mare intorno* (*The Sea Around* 2003), a collection of intertwined short stories by Sardinian anthropologist and writer Giulio Angioni, contemplating the sea from Intramontis, states that the first time that he saw the sea he became aware that he had forever known that the sea was out there. He knew that the sea was all around even though he did not know that he knew (17). The silent presence of the sea is a driving force of the first story; it returns in the last one, providing a frame for the entire narration, which is a journey in different times of Sardinian history. The last dialogue of the book between an intellectual, presumably a projection of Angioni himself, and a shepherd deals with the "meaning of the sea." The shepherd, who is the main voice in this conversation, does not see the sense of the sea because it is "too big



and deep" (190); he prefers the company of goats and does not see any use for the sea that surrounds the island, enclosing it with fixed borders. However, he admits, the sea triggers ideas on how the world changes, becoming an agent of movement and change. Nonetheless, he notes that tourism and pollution caused by human presence have transformed the coast into an overpopulated urban land that has taken away from shepherds the territory once devoted to pasture (194-95). The shepherd is convinced that humans are made to walk on the earth; they better stay away from the sea (197). The sea is a "traitor," more dangerous than the land. Regardless, he concludes, from a distance, from the top of a mountain, the sea is fascinating, precisely because it is so big and surrounds the island. The last word of the shepherd is that if the sea weren't there he would truly miss it a lot (203).

## Conclusion

Salvatore Mannuzzu writes that Sardinian writers speak of roots because they run the risk of losing them (1234). He meditates on the image of the freight trains carrying toxic waste from the continent to Sardinia as emblematic of the deterioration of the natural and human environment on the island (1225). The end of traditional Sardinia, what Mannuzzu calls *finis Sardiniae*, started in the *tempo di mezzo*, the fifties and sixties of the last century, with incipient modernization. Franco Cassano in his *Pensiero meridiano* suggests the need of a critique of normative models of modernization derived from Eurocentric and North Atlantic paradigms. He holds that an original path to modernity exists in the Mediterranean and the so-called Global Souths. He also suggests not to think of the South in light of modernity, but rather to think of modernity in light of the South as the space of an original identity to be recovered and rediscovered (13-21). To this goal, Mannuzzu proposes the need to re-name things in a collective search for meaning (1244). In this essay, I have insisted on how this search for meaning emerges in Sardinian writers in relation to the Mediterranean landscape through which they contribute to form their poetic geography.

A true poetic geography can only be the result of a collective endeavor that needs to become aware of the more-than-human origin of human identities. The Sardinian writers I have considered in my essay are working in this direction. They are attempting to rediscover the meaning of words in their origins related to the natural life, the biological and material basis of language. As Vico points out in his *New Science*, the native languages "have sylvan and rustic origins" (240) that need to be appreciated in order to understand the deep roots of human culture. The Mediterranean Sea contributes to the vital rediscovery of meaning advocated by Vico's poetic geography and Sardinian writers by interjecting a sense of movement in the otherwise immobile Sardinian landscape. First, we saw this feature at work in Grazia Deledda and Salvatore Satta. In their novels, the movement of the landscape still concretizes in what Deleuze and Guattari call "faciality."

With Vico, Bateson and Merleau-Ponty we saw the interconnectedness of mind and nature. Vico studies the origin of this condition in the *bestioni*, ancestors of human

beings. The creation of European humanist civilization coincides with the process of the de-territorialization of the body that results in a re-territorialization on the subjective face. In this process, landscape acquires its own face, coming to life in a poetic geography. Primitives were not aware of this movement of de-territorialization, they did not have the ideas of face and subjectivity. They lived immersed in their senses and bodily oriented imagination. Vico and Deleuze use similar concepts in this regard. Vico holds that *bestioni* like animals only had a neutral face (*facies*) because only humans have the visage (*vultus*) as a principal feature of recognition (Vico, *Universal Right*, xlv, 54). Along the same lines, Deleuze and Guattari write, "'Primitives' may have the most human of heads, the most beautiful and most spiritual, but they have no face (*visage*) and need none. The reason is simple. The face is not a universal" (176).

For Deleuze and Guattari as for Vico the development of Western civilization corresponds to a reduction of the body to the face and to a contraction of the world to the landscape. On the one hand, Vico, in a metaphysical perspective, holds that this development is triggered by what he calls a "poetic logic" that produces the "poetic geography" and the origin of human kind as an event in which the mind and the body are one and interdependent with nature. The relationship to the natural elements is never completely overcome by the process of civilization. Notably, Vico holds that for humans living in cities and academies it must be beneficial to "return" to the forests to regain a more substantial view on culture, overcoming the "barbarism of reflection" that makes them more "inhuman" than the "barbarism of sense" (*New Science* 1106). On the other hand, in a radically immanent perspective, Deleuze and Guattari hold that there is something "inhuman" in the face as it assumes that there is no prior signifier or subject (181). The sense cannot be reduced to a linguistic signification as modern logic and science tend to do. The sense is the terrain of literature and philosophy. As thought of the event and not of a thing, the sense for Deleuze and Guattari is rhizomatic, doomed to always resurrect as liberation of the original vital forces and expression of the creativity proper to life itself. In other words, the "barbarism of reason" can be overcome only by liberating life from what it keeps it imprisoned: "It is always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned" (Deleuze, Guattari, *What is Philosophy* 171).

Sardinian writers of younger generations in their search for roots rediscover the elemental forces of life to counter the imprisonment of life itself carried on by contemporary unsustainable economic development. In Alberto Capitta, Giulia Clarkson and Marcello Fois the "faciality" of the landscape tends to disappear wrecked by violent history or submerged in a sort of Heraclitean flow of things. Finally, in Giulio Angioni's *Il mare intorno* the sea recovers its double and contradictory nature of agent of both isolation and communication. Angioni's look from above, from the top of Intramontis, recuperates the deep sense of Sardinia's poetic geography, suspended between the mountains and the sea, between immobility and movement, between being and nothingness. In the appreciation of this suspension the poetic narrative projects a hope for a new horizon in which Sardinia's landscape can recuperate and maintain its vital maritime face as a guarantee of a future identity.

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